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Secrecy and absence in the residue of covert drone strikes



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ABSTRACT

By focusing on the materials and practices that prosecute drone warfare, critical scholarship has emphasised the internal state rationalisation of this violence, while positioning secrecy and absence as barriers to research. This neglects the public existence of covert U.S. drone strikes through the rumours and debris they leave behind, and the consequences for legitimisation. This article argues that by signifying the possible use of covertness, the public residue of unseen strikes materialises spaces of suspected secrecy. This secrecy frames seemingly arbitrary traces of violence as significant in having not been secreted by the state, and similarly highlights the absence in these spaces of clear markers of particular people and objects, including casualties. Drawing on colonial historiography, the article conceptualises this dynamic as producing implicit significations or intimations, unverifiable ideas from absences, which can undermine rationalisations of drone violence. The article examines the political consequences of these allusions through an historical affiliation with lynching practice. In both cases, traces of unseen violence represent the practice as distanced and confounding, prompting a focus on the struggle to comprehend. Intimations from spaces of residue position strikes as too ephemeral and materially insubstantial to understand. Unlike the operating procedures of drone warfare, then, these traces do not dehumanise targets. Rather, they narrow witnesses' ethical orientation towards these events and casualties, by prompting concern with intangibility rather than the infliction of violence itself. A political response to covert strikes must go beyond 'filling in' absences and address how absence gains meaning in implicit, inconspicuous ways.

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The frequent media and scholarly recourse to dubbing this the 'age of the drone' attests to the centrality of armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in the public imaginary of U.S. counter-terrorism. Yet it is striking that the official state secrecy which surrounds much armed drone practice has been afforded little commentary in critical scholarship. While drone strikes are undertaken in official war theatres by the U.S. Air Force, strikes outside those areas are conducted through programmes operated by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defence's Joint Special Operations Command. This worldwide use of armed drones was initially authorised as part of a 17 September 2001 Presidential Directive, which pre-authorised covert operations targeting al Qaeda suspects for assassination across the globe (Fuller, 2015, pp. 786–7). Being further codified in 'execute orders' pre-approving U.S. special forces actions outside official battlefields, this authorisation led to today's parallel and joint CIA and JSOC 'kill/capture'

programmes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia (Shah, 2014, pp. 62–3). The two organisations work in concert with other security and intelligence agencies to prosecute strikes on the basis of both 'kill lists' of profiled individuals and pre-defined categories of potentially-threatening behaviour (Niva, 2013, pp. 196–7). While their statutory authorities and histories differ, CIA and JSOC strikes are conducted covertly, intending that the role of the U.S. sponsor "will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly" (U.S. Code, 2013, § 3093(e)).

Intuitively, the covertness of these programmes would have significant implications for the existence and geopolitical dynamics of strikes conducted under their purview. Yet the secrecy surrounding CIA and JSOC strikes has been insufficiently conceptualised. Two recent articles critique the narrow scholarly framing of 'the drones debate' (Allinson, 2015, pp. 114–7; Carvin, 2015, pp. 132–5). Yet neither piece significantly addresses whether the covertness of strikes should shape a research agenda on drones. Carvin's piece begins with a T. J. Lawrence quote that references secrecy, but does not discuss the issue again. Allinson

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briefly notes two aspects of drone's secrecy: firstly, CIA strikes are only "notionally secret"; and secondly, that secrecy makes it "impossible to be sure exactly how many people have been killed by drones" (Allinson, 2015, p. 113 n. 1). The secrecy of covert strikes is therefore paradoxical: it fails to keep strikes secret, but it prevents robust understanding due to absences in public knowledge.

This article argues that both secrecy and absence are significant, and paradoxical, parts of the discursive existence of covert drone strikes, of the representations and social practices that "call [strikes] into being and give [them] materiality" (Dunn, 2009, p. 431). Both the secrecy and absence surrounding these strikes have been implicitly positioned in critical scholarship as barriers to research, as restricting access to drone warfare. This article argues to the contrary: secrecy and absence shape the existence of covert strikes *within* the public sphere. As such, strikes enact an intersection both of secrecy and publicity and of presence and absence.

These overlaps, moreover, constitute public spaces of secrecy and absence that bear on the legitimisation of state violence. These strikes materialise in public *in excess of* state practices or channels of communication; indeed, these covert operations are rarely acknowledged by U.S. actors. The secrecy of drone strikes is neither articulated nor rationalised by the state but, like absence, is a product of rumours and debris that appear in the public sphere after these events and which signify that they have passed unseen. The article conceptualises these traces as residue of covert violence. This residue produces public spaces whose meaning is not predetermined by the state. When this residue is mediated via press and social media coverage in Britain and the United States, their secretcies and absences give meaning to unseen acts of state violence in ways that do not necessarily rationalise that violence. While the operating procedures of drone warfare have been theorised as producing imagined geographies of permanent potential threat, rationalising state violence in such spaces, the rumours and debris that materialise strikes in the public sphere do not legitimise them in accordance with some state rationalisation.

In order to analyse the geopolitical dynamics of these spaces of secrecy, and their consequences for challenging state violence, the article turns to both colonial historiography and scholarship on lynching practice in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Recent studies of colonial archives and literature have conceptualised how texts and bodies can allude to ideas about colonial practices in excess of any explicit articulations. This article elaborates this concept to examine how the secrecy and absences of strike residue together signify things in excess of the explicit articulations of press coverage and social media. Residue intimates suggestive but unverifiable ideas about unseen state violence, in particular ideas about people and objects which appear absent from the public sphere: the casualties of these strikes, and the networks that conduct drone warfare.

To analyse how these intimations affect the legitimisation of state violence, the article proposes an historical affiliation between the residue of covert strikes and the public traces of lynchings that were used to report on the practice nationally in the United States. While the dynamics of each practice are significantly different, their existences in public discourse through material traces and rumour involve similar absences, of documentation of the violence and violated bodies. In the case of lynching, these non-bodily traces gave meaning to the practice as something confronting society in its aberrance, as being difficult to comprehend relative to wider societal changes. This meaning marginalised the violence inflicted upon casualties from the ethical significance ascribed to the practice.

The article uses this affiliation with lynching to demonstrate that intimations from covert strike residue implicitly produce a similar discursive dynamic, through unspoken hints and allusions

about what remains absent. These intimations do not dehumanise targets and legitimise violence, a dynamic frequently attributed to drone warfare's operating mechanisms; rather, they represent this practice as ephemeral, as too fleeting and insubstantial in its public mark for witnesses to comprehend its dynamics, to understand 'what happened'. As with lynching, this shapes a subject-position focused not on the infliction of violence but on the struggle to comprehend intangible state practices.

This dynamic from spaces of residue undermines the idea that drone warfare can be effectively challenged by deconstructing how strikes are rationalised through their secret conduct. As well as decoding the imagined geographies of hidden networks and procedures, it is vital to recognise how public residue materialises strikes as intangible events, and positions witnesses as spatially, intellectually and morally distanced from them, delimiting the ethical import of the violence inflicted upon casualties. Unlike targeting procedures, the spaces shaped by strike residue do not demonise or dehumanise targets, but they do "establish the conditions of possibility for a political response" to this violence, of what is politically and ethically significant about it (Campbell, 2007, p. 361).

The article proceeds by first examining the critical literature around armed drone attacks, before detailing the theory and methodology of residue and intimations and outlining the historical affiliation with lynching. The article then analyses covert drone strike residue in United States and British national newspaper and social media coverage from 2011 to 2015, pivoting on moments when critical interest in drone warfare increased – for instance, the period during John Brennan's confirmation hearing as the new director of the CIA – since emblematic representational practices are often intensified at such moments, providing a relevant source of data (Doty, 1996, pp. 12–13). This also allows us to test the idea that intimations from residue could reconfigure state rationalisations of drone warfare.

1. Theorising drone strikes beyond their operationalisation

Covert strikes are rarely documented as they are enacted, but instead are primarily known through snippets of information, rumour and debris. Critical scholars and journalists have drawn on these traces to assemble particular understandings of the practice. Critical scholarship has predominantly focused on traces of the *operationalisation* of drone strikes policy, covering the visualisation methods of drone surveillance, the operating procedures of target-construction, and the materiality and embodiment involved in drone strike networks. The critical literature in International Relations, political geography and security studies has traced the existence and political dynamics of strikes, the meanings that strikes produce in the world, to the materials, discourses and networks that operate these programmes. As such, the spaces and identities that are produced by drone strikes – that is, the way that social reality is made intelligible, giving spaces and identities materiality, through the social practices that constitute strikes (Dunn, 2009, pp. 426, 431) – have been conceptualised as cohering with the rationalisation of this violence within these materials and operating procedures.

Insodoing, this literature has reduced the ontology of drone warfare, that which constitutes drone strikes in the world, to its prosecution within these procedures and networks, and delimited strikes' political dynamics to those that correlate to strikes' internal representation and prosecution. Secrecy is implicitly relevant only insofar as it hampers analysis by restricting access to the event of a strike, which exists outside the public sphere. What happens once strikes leave the state apparatuses that enact them and materialise as *public events*, through the after-the-fact narrative weaving of

their public traces (Dosse, 2015, pp. 38–9), is left unaddressed.

For Grégoire Chamayou, this conceptual and analytical focus is a matter of “taking apart the mechanism of violence” in order to “discover the implications of how it works for the action that it implements”. Chamayou extrapolates from the mechanism in order to understand the spaces and identities that drone warfare materialises, since the means of violence “not only make it possible to take action but also *determine the form of that action*” (Chamayou, 2015, p. 17, emphasis added). Drawing on snippets of targeting procedures, Chamayou theorises the covert drone programme as a form of militarised manhunting, whose apparatuses of surveillance and visualisation of territory and bodies shift the dynamics of warfare (Chamayou, 2015, pp. 37–45). This shift reshapes the spaces and identities of war: it produces subject-positions of the drone-as-hunter and its evasive prey; and it re-constructs the space of ‘armed conflict’ where lethal means is legitimate, turning it from a fixed battlefield to an indeterminate space that ceaselessly reforms around the pursued target (Chamayou, 2015, pp. 30–5, 52–9).

Chamayou’s analysis demonstrates what is at stake in locating the ontology of drone warfare in its materials and practices of prosecution. From this perspective, the operationalisation of drone warfare shapes spaces and identities that rationalise drone strikes: individuals are produced as threats and thus legitimate targets, while the spaces where this state violence occurs are rendered both unruly, therefore threatening, and endlessly mutable in scale and position for the purposes of mobile networks of violence. These operating procedures and networks are what ceaselessly produce the spaces and identities of drone warfare. Critical scholarship that begins with these materials and practices frames the challenge of drone warfare as one of recognising and revealing how this production of space and identity rationalises drone violence. The analytic that is constructed to do so has two consequences: it delimits drone strikes to the materials and practices that enact strikes *outside the public sphere*, leaving unexamined how the spaces where this violence is actually inflicted are called into being once strikes exceed these targeting networks; and it relegates secrecy and absence to epistemological barriers to research.

Scholarship examining the visual technologies of drone surveillance and targeting echoes this analytic. Examining the ‘kill chain’ of “actors, objects, practices, discourses and affects” which enact both overt and covert drone strikes, Gregory details the ‘scopic regime’ that is reiterated within this chain, culturally-mediated frames of vision which make sense of the wealth of visual data that drones accumulate (Gregory, 2011, pp. 196, 190). Produced through surveillance imagery and real-time connectivity between actors at different nodes of targeting networks, this regime shapes drone pilot subject-positions immersed in visualisations of the terrain ‘down below’, but also intimately connected to fellow soldiers on that terrain. Military personnel below are brought ‘closer’ to pilots, “render[ing] ‘Our’ space familiar even in ‘their’ space – which remains obdurately Other”, filled with potential but opaque threats (Gregory, 2011, p. 201). Wall and Monahan elaborate the role of visibility, conceptualising drone networks as practising an “exclusionary politics of omniscient vision”, where ambiguous visual information is placed within “functional categories” that “correspond to the needs and biases of the operators, not the targets, of surveillance” (Wall & Monahan, 2011, pp. 243, 240). This scopic regime “radically homogeniz[e] local difference, lumping together innocent civilians with enemy combatants” (Wall & Monahan, 2011, p. 240). The event of the strike is theorised as producing homogeneously dangerous spaces and peoples.

Other analyses focus on how the operating procedures of covert ‘signature strikes’ produce people and terrain in biopolitical terms,

with observed behaviours, rather than known identities, coded and categorised based on their potential for future threat. Locating the political dynamics of strikes in the “governmental technologies” and “political rationalities” of target-construction, Shaw theorises that the coding of information on potential targets’ behaviours into analysable patterns produces targets as “virtualised forms of emergence that may become threats in the future”, based on a “process-based, even epidemiological understanding of danger” (Shaw, 2013, pp. 540, 549, 548). Allinson modifies this biopolitical theorisation by conceptualising target-construction as a “racial algorithm of distinction”, whereby surveillance and auditing produce distinctions between populations worthy of life and populations whose lives threaten the health of the former (Allinson, 2015, pp. 117, 118–20). This conceptualises drone strikes from the perspective of “[t]he drone’s eye view”, with the “visible techniques of distinction and allocation ... used by the drone pilots” producing social reality by “delineating those areas and populations” where death is acceptable (Allinson, 2015, p. 120). Vasko goes one further, analysing how “reconnaissance-strike complexes” rely on anthropological knowledge, coding and mapping patterns of behaviour through concepts of culture (Vasko, 2013, pp. 85, 95–7). By coding behaviour as evidence of culture, strike events produce spaces in terms of “hierarchical relations”, with spaces containing potentially-threatening cultural behaviours constituted as “spaces of threat [that] are always threatening the Homeland, and thus need to be intervened upon” (Vasko, 2013, pp. 91, 92). This in turn “fully realise[s]” the subject-position of “a secured, singular, and universal power like the United States” (Vasko, 2013, p. 90). In the biopolitical reading of operating procedures, strikes produce threatening spaces and bodies and collective identities that need securing against infiltration by the former.

Finally, critical scholarship focusing on the materiality and physical embodiment of drone warfare locates the political dynamics of strikes in the materials and flesh that enact this violence. Wilcox focuses on how visualisation and target-construction shape drone pilots’ bodily experience of feeling ‘at home’, of being within familiar spaces and social relations, by producing targets who are intimately experienced through visualisation as “*embodying ... formless, malevolent forces*” and as therefore being ‘out of place’ (Wilcox, 2015, p. 128, original emphasis). Those targeted “are materialised” as close-but-distant “contaminating terrorist bodies” that are unassimilable and must be protected against (Wilcox, 2015, pp. 130, 129). Holmqvist conceptualises a human-material assemblage of ‘fleshy’ and ‘steely’ bodies as constituting drone warfare, and points to the agency of materials within this assemblage, with the drone camera screen recoding people and objects down below and fostering pilots’ embodied experience of omnipresence (Holmqvist, 2013, pp. 538–9, 543–5). These “material [powers]” and resultant experiences reshape the ontology or “norm of the human” in war, “producing populations” as “the grey mass of non-existence or possibly ‘collateral damage’” (Holmqvist, 2013, pp. 550, 547). Material ‘agents’ therefore shape pilots’ experience of spaces of violence. Finally, Shaw and Akhter posit a “more-than-human explanation” for “the transformation of war” through drone strikes (Shaw & Akhter, 2014, p. 215). Cumulative Presidential Directives under which covert strikes are conducted decentralise responsibility, by legitimising anonymous bureaucratic actions and pre-empting sovereign decision-making. Meanwhile, the ‘kill lists’ of potential targets diffuse responsibility by subordinating individual pilots’ judgement to targeting data and imagery that has already been shaped and coded within the targeting network (Shaw & Akhter, 2014, pp. 221–2, 228–9). This analysis locates the political dynamics of drone violence in the spaces within which these objects circulate, “connecting battlefield with boardroom”. Secrecy is relevant insofar as it is a product of “bureaucratic power”

that attempts to “deflect public criticism”, conceptually relegating secrecy to these bureaucratic spaces (Shaw & Akhter, 2014, pp. 221, 226).

Even scholarship which critiques the narrow foci of drone strike literature theorises the production of space through the state's operationalisation of violence. While Grayson rightly notes scholarship's tendency to ignore how drones' “technical rationalities” are “culturally produced and circulated” through public narration, that “political culture” is conceptualised through “its deployment of violence” and “its own self-understanding” in the process (Grayson, 2012, p. 30). As such, cultural production is interpreted as a question of “how a liberal regime – as a potential assassin – *understands itself* as a moral actor and biopolitical entity” (Grayson, 2012, p. 36, emphasis added). This conceptualisation does not pinpoint the perceptual boundaries of that liberal regime – that is, who counts as shaping these representations of targeted killing and self-understandings. While Grayson argues that the “policy resiliency” of strikes is partly dependent upon “forms of rationalisation” that make up its cultural narration, he also speaks of “audiences” who must recognise these rationalisations and accept their narration of events (Grayson, 2012, pp. 30, 36). This hints at the potential for public narrations that exceed or subvert liberal states' rationalisation of their violence.

By focusing on the operationalisation of covert strikes, be it the visual regimes of strikes, procedures of target-construction, or the materials and embodiments within drone networks, the above critical literature reduces the event of the strike to the materials and social practices that enact it, separating drone warfare from the public sphere. When these practices do cross over into the public sphere, they are theorised as materialising spaces conducive to the internal rationalisation of this violence, as spaces of permanent potential threat. Secrecy, explicitly or implicitly, assists in this production of space by preventing access to the ontology of drone warfare, hiding the political dynamics of strikes that rationalise these programmes.

This analytic echoes the phenomenon described by Roger Stahl as drone vision, where the view provided by the drone's ‘gun camera’ is interpreted as a glimpse of a wider hidden apparatus of power. This interpretation accepts the representation of subject and object implied by this militarised vision while imbuing the drone with an opaque power, as the object that sees all while remaining aloof (Stahl, 2013, pp. 663–4). This perpetuates “the fantasy of gaining access to telepresent military power” through this glimpse (Stahl, 2013, p. 667). The above theorisations similarly offer a fantasy of access to drone warfare, promising to reveal the ‘meaning’ of a state practice that remains largely hidden. Echoing the historical trend in covert action research, these theories have implicitly conceptualised “a ‘hidden truth’” within the documentary archives and networked apparatuses of the state (Mistry, 2011, p. 267). Secrecy and absence are simply barriers to understanding.

Some critical scholarship does consider the existence of strikes and secrecy outside the materials and practices that enact them, and therefore the potential for space to materialise in excess of state rationalisations. In going beyond the “hidden politics” of governance to consider public “disputes and disagreements”, Walters examines how the object of the drone is “brought into the public sphere” by non-state political actors, even in the absence of documentation of strikes (Walters, 2014, pp. 102–3, 106). In public debates over Israel's use of armed drones in Gaza, drones have been made present by NGOs using proxies of material traces left by missiles, “weav[ing] these fragments and tatters into a narrative” even as those materials possessed “an uncertain and even ghostly quality”, having “proliferate[d] under conditions of secrecy” (Walters, 2014, pp. 108, 103). Walters thus acknowledges how strikes produce *spaces of state secrecy* in the public sphere, spaces

exceeding state networks, and how objects can shape public political dynamics even in their absence.

Walters' analysis, however, focuses on secrecy that accrues in the aftermath of an *overt* act of acknowledged state violence, not the covertness that surrounds the CIA and JSOC programmes. Moreover, Walters examines how traces of drone violence are ‘made to speak’ by “forensic analysis of materials” that make “claims for objects” (Walters, 2014, pp. 110, 109). What has not yet been analysed is whether traces of covert U.S. drone violence might produce both state secrecy and absence *in excess of* any explicit invocations, including from the state. Such a political dynamic is not a result of attempts to ‘unearth’ what has been hidden, but of public traces that give meaning to absences in excess of explicit claims about, and rationalisations of, covert violence.

2. Residue and intimations of covert violence

While the drone programmes outside official warzones are covert, this does not mean they are clandestine: these operations materially enter the public sphere, albeit without publicity or acknowledgement of their sponsor. But even a clandestine operation can produce public traces. This is how covert strikes have materialised in the public sphere and then been reported in Britain and the U.S.: not through documentation of their occurrence, but markers left in their wake. Many of these markers exist in a state of disintegration, while others perch on the brink of immateriality: plumes of smoke rising into the air; smouldering rubble of destroyed objects; ambiguous marks left on the landscape; contradictory eye-witness statements and rumours; unofficial insights and speculation into the general operational procedures possibly behind these events; and conspicuous state silences and unanswered questions after the event becomes known publicly. When assembled in public discourse as traces of a strike, these markers signify their *dissimilarity* from the posited event: smoke and rumours represent not the unfolding of violence but its aftermath. Markers which instantiate this political dynamic can be conceptualised as residue of covert action: traces which signify that the event has passed unseen.

Unlike ruins, residue of covert violence need not comprise once-whole objects which have decayed over time, and does not signify the transience and disappearance of the lived symbolic order that gave it meaning (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012). Residue signifies processes of state violence that are *ongoing* in the *present* but that remain absent from the public sphere. Residue demonstrates that far from being zero-sum categories, presence and absence are multifaceted qualities: something can be absent in one sense while possessing other kinds of presence (Buchli, 2010, pp. 186–7). Presence and absence are also not essential qualities, allowing something to signify absence through qualities that instantiate its own presence. Worn-down material objects understood as having particular purposes or uses can signify the material and temporal absence of people and activities once associated with them (Edensor, 2005, pp. 327–30). Like the remains of the dead, traces “bear the imprint[s]” of what has passed and can signify “chains of associations” to absent people and objects (Keenan & Weizman, 2012, pp. 18, 65). In the case of covert action, bullet holes indicate a firefight that was not witnessed; the smoke drifting from a wrecked building alludes to that which set the house alight.

Some previous scholarship has examined traces of covert strikes to try to ‘fill in’ these absences. The Forensic Architecture research group has used witness statements, satellite imagery and on-the-ground images to reconstruct the spatial and material dynamics of particular strikes, decoding these traces in order to geographically and temporally locate strikes and to detail how they likely unfolded and impacted surrounding people and objects. The

research is positioned as “demonstrating how ... analysis may be carried out even when confronted with limited information and research materials” on strikes (*Forensic Architecture*, n.d.). This constitutes a particular approach to absence, a witnessing act that attempts to make things present, to salvage hidden meaning in a move akin to archaeology (Wylie, 2009, p. 279). The present article complements this work by resisting the impulse to salvage, and instead examining how absences exist and enact political dynamics in the public sphere. These absences do not reveal ‘what happened’ in the past, but rather shape the meaning of residue and absent people and objects in the present, raising ethical challenges that are not wholly answered by attempting to ‘give things presence’.

This production of absence is shaped by the fact that residue also signifies a suspicion of state secrecy. As covert actions, drone strikes outside official battlefields are rarely acknowledged by U.S. state officials. However, material and textual traces that circulate afterwards juxtapose one another to signify the possibility that the unseen event was a secret kept by the state from the public. Statements about targeting procedures are made by officials who remain anonymous as they are ‘not allowed to discuss this policy’, hinting at unseen ongoing operations; non-state rumours of a strike express uncertainty over the dead and are accompanied by a conspicuous state silence in response; smouldering wreckage pointed to as evidence of a strike signifies a lack of public documentation of the event itself, emphasised by ongoing efforts to establish what happened through non-state sources. This residue signifies secrecy as a mere suspicion, as a possible explanation for the strike having passed unseen. In so doing, secrecy enters public discourse “as secret”, manifesting “within a particular delimitation of space, time, the visible, the sayable, the audible, and political experience” and producing “material shifts ... not through revelation, but concealment” (Birchall, 2014, pp. 26, 34, original emphasis).

Through this signification, residue materialises spaces of suspected secrecy where these traces manifest: from the site of the strike itself from which rumours and debris emanate, to public fora ‘back home’ which details of the covert programmes leak into. Unlike state spaces of secrecy, whose “material implementations” of “secret relations” tip into public visibility and force a spatial expansion of secrecy (Paglen, 2010, p. 760), spaces of covert action residue are not produced and reiterated by the state perpetrator of violence; rather, they materialise through traces left in the wake of that violence, with the perpetrator absent. These spaces exist in the public sphere, the space constituted by phenomena of generalised sensory accessibility (Adut, 2012, p. 243), but they intersect and signify an absent covert sphere, by signifying suspected secrecy around the event and the processes that enacted it. This secrecy is produced by non-state material and textual traces, *outwith* state representations or social practices, and as such this intersection of the public and covert spheres remains equivocal.

This secrecy shapes the meaning of residue. Were these state actions overt, their public traces would simply signify that they were not documented as they unfolded; their traces would be framed as the arbitrary left-overs of an unseen state process. By signifying secrecy, however, these traces are implicitly represented as significant in their arbitrariness, in having *not* been secreted by the state (without implying intentionality therein). As such, residue becomes suggestive as public evidence of an otherwise-secret action, implicitly signifying that it possibly reveals things about the strike which covertness would have otherwise obscured – not because those traces would have necessarily been hidden by the state, but because their precarious link to an unseen covert action might have remained unknown. These spaces of suspected secrecy are thus produced as publicly-significant in that they exist and are identified in the public sphere, beyond the control of the state

perpetrator. Absences within those spaces thus gain similar significance: lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions within these rumours and debris are now signified as leaving unresolved the characteristics of absent people and objects, making these absences equivocal and ambiguous (Meier, Frers, & Sigvardsdotter, 2013, pp. 425–7). It is unclear what exactly is absent and why. Having avoided state secretion, these equivocal absences become significant in rendering the public record of ‘what happened’ inconclusive and even incoherent.

Absences are therefore produced *in relation* to secrecy, so that while smoke rising from rubble might be contextualised as the debris of a strike against an al-Qaeda target, that smoke is framed by a suspicion of secrecy such that it signifies its inscrutability, the lack of clear markers of the identity of the target in this public debris. As public evidence of covert action, the debris is constituted as significant on account of this lack, since the lacuna of a material trace of the target’s identity leaves this residue unable to confirm what has taken place. This allows residue to modulate explicit claims about the unseen event: because secrecy represents residue as public evidence and thus worthy of scrutiny, equivocal absences become significant in terms of what they *could* indicate, signifying unverifiable possibilities. The lack of trace of the target’s identity becomes suggestive in its ambiguity and signifies the possibility that this identity remains unconfirmed, and that the mechanisms by which the casualty was targeted are being kept secret by the state. While these ideas remain unverifiable, the incongruity of absences in the public record allows them to shape public meaning. Unlike other contemporary warfare, then, absent targets are not being effaced or “[denied] this very last strand of recognition: being represented” (Delori, 2014, p. 526); rather, they are signified *as absent*, with these incongruities prompting witnesses to *consider* that absence, rather than obscuring it.

This political dynamic can be conceptualised as a process of intimation from residue. These significations are not explicitly articulated but are produced *in excess* of what is explicitly stated or visualised about these covert strikes. Recent scholarship on colonial archives and literature has theorised such excess unspoken meaning. Intimacy normally refers to closeness in social relationships, a proximity of bodies that produces familiarity. Different degrees of intimacy have historically helped reiterate colonial categories of difference: appearances and behaviours of bodies in close contact are contrasted as evidence of race, sex and class. As products of intimacy, however, those claims of separateness are always precarious, prone to being undone by the “awkward familiarities” and “unsolicited attentions” that such proximity engenders (Stoler, 2006, pp. 15–16). This overlays intimacy with the verb to intimate, as in indirect communication, to hint or allude to something without stating it explicitly. As Aung-Thin demonstrates through colonial fiction, intimacies allow for intimations, since relationships developed between bodies of ostensibly different categories can appear to decouple certain appearances and identities from expected behaviours; through “continuous allusion”, bodies’ behaviours can hint that these categories are flexible or illusory (Aung Thin, 2013, p. 74).

Extending intimacy beyond mere physical proximity (Pain & Staeheli, 2014, pp. 344–6), the present article conceptualises intimacy across degrees of presence and absence: when contextualised as relating to a covert action, residue signifies its intimacy with absent people and objects involved in that event. Those absences can then signal their inability to corroborate or confirm aspects of that secret event, intimating excess meaning about those absentees. These intimations shape the subject-positions produced by residue: by highlighting and signifying unverifiable ideas about that which appears absent, residue positions those who witness it in relation to both the state perpetrator of

violence and anything else which is intimated in its absence, including the casualties of these covert operations. Intimations shape how spaces of residue and absence materialise and appear intelligible; like more explicit discursive practices, they “structure our encounters with other human beings in space and time” (Campbell, 2007, p. 361), even when those beings are absent.

Lisa Lowe has elaborated a method of reading for intimations that are produced by absences. The intimacies that interest Lowe, between Chinese indentured labourers and slaves in nineteenth-century British Caribbean colonies, were actively discouraged by the British colonial government, and as a result they are rarely explicitly detailed in the various documents and records of colonial governance in the Caribbean. But although those intimacies “[are] not explicitly named in the documents”, they are “paradoxically, everywhere present in the archive” in the form of “rhetorical ellipses” or “the rhetorical peculiarities of the documents, the places where particular figures, tropes or circumlocutions are repeated to cover gaps or tensions” (Lowe, 2015, p. 35). Being “referenced by negative means, in cautionary rhetorics and statements of prohibition”, these intimacies and their unwanted consequences are intimated, signifying the danger posed by such “mixture” to the social boundaries of difference supporting colonial rule (Lowe, 2015, p. 34).

Building on Lowe's methodology, the present article traces textual and visual ellipses and peculiarities within press coverage of drone strike residue: the lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions which signify absences of relevant people and objects from the spaces of residue. The article examines how these ellipses are made meaningful by significations of suspected secrecy, with secrecy framing residue as public evidence of covert action and therefore highlighting the equivocal quality of any absences as significant. The article examines what unverifiable possibilities are likely to be implicitly signified once these equivocal absences materialise in this way. These intimations are then compared with the explicit articulations made about covert strikes, establishing how the former juxtapose the latter to reshape the meaning attached to spaces of suspected secrecy.

3. Historical affiliations of drone strikes

The present article's analytical focus on public spaces of residue and secrecy, rather than hidden state networks, allows for an expansion of the historical lineages of covert drone strikes. The predominant focus on the internal logic and rationalisation of drone violence has positioned drones within the history of the pacification and policing of colonised populations. Critical scholars have drawn parallels between the rationale and technologies that underpin drone strikes and those underpinning the use of air power by the European empires in the early twentieth centuries. In both cases, the literature argues, regimes of state violence are designed to constitute and maintain colonial governance through bombing, surveillance and information-gathering directed both at colonised populations and at targeted individuals perceived as threatening that governance (Neocleous, 2013; Satia, 2014; Chamayou, 2015; Vasko, 2013). This linking of drone strikes to colonial governance constitutes “a history of the tactical imagination behind [drones]”, including the “cultural understandings” of the spaces of the Middle East and North Africa which have “guided the invention and application” of both colonial aerial governance and the use of drones today (Satia, 2014, pp. 1, 2). This parallel solidifies the understanding of strikes as shaping space in accordance with the internal rationalisation of drone warfare.

Public spaces of residue and suspected secrecy suggest a different lineage, one based not on internal logics but on traces of unseen violence and the absences that remain. This article proposes

an historical affiliation between the residue of covert drone strikes and national representations of lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States. Affiliation is conceptualised here through the work of and on the writer W.G. Sebald, whereby traces of seemingly incommensurable violent events are nonetheless juxtaposed based on those traces' shared qualities of sparseness, entropy and absence, in order to ‘suspend’ those elusive qualities and examine how they shape and gain meaning (Gray, 2010, pp. 41–2). Rather than try to unearth ‘what really happened’, the aim is to examine the “ethical orientations” that are produced towards absences, how witnesses are prompted to consider “what is legitimate and fair to feel and do” towards the violence inflicted upon those who lack qualities of presence (Chouliaraki, 2009, p. 217). If absent people and objects are made intelligible and ethically significant in one set of traces through explicit articulation, that dynamic can be used to examine whether another set of traces gives similar ethical significance to absences in ways that are obscured or naturalised by remaining unspoken. The affiliation of such representations can highlight whether discursive dynamics within some traces are present but inconspicuous in others (Bernstein, 2009, pp. 45–50).

The affiliation between drone strike residue and lynching representations is based on the fact that, as with covert strikes, documentation of lynching violence being enacted rarely entered national discourse. Photographs of lynch mobs and victims were secreted among sympathetic local communities in an attempt to control the meaning of the practice in terms of the social identities of those implicated (Wood, 2009, pp. 12–14, 103–9). As with covert strikes, any glimpse of perpetration was kept hidden. As anti-lynching activists increasingly publicised such documentation to denounce the practice, perpetrators hid both their acts of violence and the violated bodies themselves, with “[r]umour and speculation now perform[ing] the rhetorical violence” previously enacted by more spectacular public lynchings (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 269). Journalists thus drew upon places and objects documented in the event's public aftermath – courtrooms, streets, lynching trees and so on (Wood, 2009, p. 106). These traces were contextualised within claims about the absent violence, from eye-witness accounts and re-constructions to editorial arguments as to the violence's causes. Lynch victims' bodies became absences signified through the traces drawn upon by newspapers.

The absence of violated bodies gained meaning within a particular narrative that portrayed lynching as unconnected to wider society. As with covert strikes, lynching was represented as violence organised without public knowledge until after it occurred, and as a practice that had not been countenanced by that public. As such, lynching appeared to cut against the grain of societal developments which supposedly indicated a move away from a political culture that would condone such violence. National commentators lamented lynching as an aberrant reversion to barbarism that risked spreading like a disease and stymieing progress towards a more civilised society. These claims were made despite the fact that the evidence of lynching which was cited – from mock re-enactments of the practice to lynchings' occurrence in well-connected urban centres – hinted at the practice's relation to social changes heralded by modernity (Goldsby, 2006, pp. 18–25; Wood, 2009, pp. 5–9). This representation of lynching as an atavistic reflection of regional cultures continued through the mid-twentieth century, when the increasingly private and secretive nature of lynching themselves was interpreted as a sign of a wider societal shift away from social relations that would inculcate the practice (Rushdy, 2012, pp. 97–105). National coverage thus spatialised and temporalised the practice as a regional throwback, positioning the violence as separate from U.S. society at large and obscuring its potential connections to or fit within wider societal

developments (Goldsby, 2006, pp. 56–7, 280–1). Lynching became something incongruous which 'confronted' modern society, rather than implicating it in any way.

The spatialising and temporalising of lynching discursively constructed and separated a national society vis-à-vis this violence, and prompted newsreaders to consider themselves part of that society. From this subject-position, lynching was intelligible and significant in its confounding aberrance. With the struggle to understand the practice becoming one of the pivots of national news accounts, these representations therefore prompted a focus back on those 'confronted' with this violence (Lutes, 2007, pp. 471–2). The violated person at the centre of any lynching was signified in her absence only as part of what was unspeakable, incongruent and thus confounding about the practice. The absent body was made meaningful in terms of the struggle to comprehend, becoming "marginal to – precisely because he is a spectacle of – the story of his own ... death", while "a spectacle of worried impotence ... becomes the most important focal point in the story's telling", that is, in narrations of the practice (Goldsby, 2006, pp. 147, 148). This dynamic moreover obscures how lynch victims are being marginalised, since it makes the violence intelligible in its being separate from and confounding to a public that is trying to scrutinise and comprehend this discomfiting practice.

The present article uses an historical affiliation between lynching and contemporary covert counter-terrorism to examine whether news coverage of covert drone strikes enacts a similar discursive dynamic, that marginalises the violence inflicted on bodies by focusing on a struggle to comprehend. This marginalisation is not a dehumanisation or effacement of targets, as with drone warfare's operating procedures, but rather a materialisation of casualties as *absent* that shapes their relevance to the meaning and significance of the violence. Both practices are materialised as spatially and temporally removed from those who have access to their public traces, albeit in different ways. But whereas in the case of lynching a dynamic of disavowal and marginalisation was enacted through explicit narratives of aberrance, in the case of covert strikes this dynamic derives from intimations of strikes' ephemerality. This dynamic marginalises the unseen violence and casualties of strikes without drawing attention to itself, since it is not explicitly articulated but is a result of suggestive possibilities that remain unspoken. An historical affiliation with lynching can therefore highlight this dynamic.

4. Actual criteria, potential targets

Most news coverage of the covert drone programmes is not of individual strikes, which are rarely officially acknowledged. Drone strikes are instead alluded to through discussion of the U.S. administration's decision-making procedures for these programmes, in particular discussion of the criteria used to decide upon 'targets' for future 'personality strikes'. The various suspicions and suggestive snippets of information which circulate about these criteria constitute residue of actual strikes, being some of the more extensive traces of strikes' ongoing enactment without providing glimpses of the events themselves.

In the run up to John Brennan's confirmation hearing, press coverage focused on U.S. lawmakers' repeated requests for the release of a "long-sought, classified Justice Department opinion" giving the Obama administration's legal justification for drone strikes against U.S. citizens abroad. Coverage presented the image of members of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees "go[ing] to an office ... at the Justice Department, where they can sit and view the legal opinion", which "isn't being made public" (Gorman & Perez, 2013). The juxtaposition between this image of Congressmen holed up in an office viewing classified targeting

rules and the implicit acknowledgement that strikes are continuing on the basis of those rules produces absence: it signifies the lack of any other markers of those strikes, including targets, shaping the public sphere as a space containing this trace of actual strikes and this absence, standing outside the state's secret space. But this juxtaposition also allows secrecy to enter the public sphere, through the suspicion that strikes are continuing unseen without state acknowledgement. This suspected secrecy frames the absence of casualties in public space as significant in leaving their identities publicly unconfirmed. Given the image of lawmakers viewing a classified memo on how those bodies were targeted, this equivocal absence alludes to the possibility that those identities have also been secreted or in fact cannot be proven by the Obama administration. This public ambiguity shapes a subject-position of doubt towards Brennan's claim that "[w]e ... use these technologies carefully and responsibly" (Gorman & Perez, 2013).

Yet while this intimation undermines explicit rationalisations of the drone policy, unknown casualties are represented only through the figure of the ambiguous potential target. Brennan himself invokes this figure, stating that "[d]eterminations about whether an individual fits the criteria" are made "on a case-by-case basis" based on "how 'imminent' a threat they pose" (Gorman & Perez, 2013). The sparseness of detail as to what 'imminent' means and the conspicuous lack of 'cases' again signifies the absence of casualties from the public sphere, intimating the idea that claims of precision may be unsupported. Yet this intimation makes absent casualties meaningful only in indicating the difficulty in comprehending unseen and distanced strikes. The ethical orientation towards casualties is narrowed to questions of what their absence possibly reveals about targeting mechanisms.

This dynamic of marginalisation was repeated in earlier coverage of the apparent revelation that President Obama was personally involved in the compiling of drone strike 'kill lists'. In the *New York Times* piece that broke the story, the "top-secret 'nominations' process to designate terrorists for kill or capture" is characterised as an analysis of "mug shots and brief biographies [that] resembled a high school yearbook layout". President Obama is described as "poring over terrorist suspects' biographies on what one official calls the macabre 'baseball cards' of an unconventional war" (Becker & Shane, 2012). As implicit evidence of ongoing but unseen strikes, these sparse and abstracted details produce a suspicion of ongoing covertness around actual strikes. This renders these details as public residue of covert actions, signifying the public absence of those targeted through this procedure, their identities inscrutable within hidden "PowerPoint slides bearing [their] names, aliases and life stories". With these 'baseball cards' remaining out of view within a process characterised as surreal in its banality, "a grim debating society", this public absence intimates the possibility that targets' identities are being secreted and even skewed or misunderstood through their presentation within this "strangest of bureaucratic rituals" (Becker & Shane, 2012).

This allusion reshapes explicit claims that drone strikes reflect "American values" of "moral responsibility" in a fight against a "metastasizing enemy [in] new and dangerous lands" (Becker & Shane, 2012). That rationalisation is implicitly represented as bearing an unproven and possibly faulty relation to these secreted slide-shows. But as with lynching, this intimation also discursively distances unseen covert strikes from wider society: with this residue hinting at unverifiable further secrecy, these traces produce a subject-position from which the practice is discomfiting on account of the suggestive but inaccessible workings of targeting procedures. Actual absent casualties are marginalised, intimated only in their reflecting the bizarre opacity of targeting.

5. Scrutinising the ephemeral

News coverage's incessant focus on the figure of the drone pilot represents covert strikes as diffused events, existing across a variety of space-time points. The notion of “[u]nleashing hell from a padded seat in suburbia” emphasises that from “an airbase in the suburbs of Syracuse, New York ... a US air pilot known only as Scott hunts down and kills people, identified as his country's enemies, 7000 miles away” (*The Sunday Times*, 2013). The semi-anonymous and snippet quality of these details produces an implicit suspicion of secrecy surrounding Scott's and others' flights. At the same time, this characterisation of drone operations signifies an absence of actual strikes through that 7000 mile distance, figuring these unseen events as having been dispersed across two distinct spaces. Fellow coverage represents the drone operator “pressing his button” and the second-and-a-half delay before “the Hellfire rocket erupt[s] from the aircraft he is controlling”, hinting at ongoing absent strikes as existing only within that slowness of time (*Bowcott & Lewis*, 2011). Indeed, coverage frequently refers to the covert drone programmes as a “push-button conflict” (*Macintyre*, 2011), where “[a]ll it takes is a flick of the joystick and squeeze of the trigger” (*The Sunday Times*, 2013), allowing “the enemy [to] be engaged by the click of a mouse from an air-conditioned bunker thousands of miles away” (*Coughlin*, 2013). As traces of implicit ongoing strikes, these abstracted references signify the absence of more tangible traces or documentation of these events within the public sphere.

With these details framed as residue of strikes that were possibly secrets kept by the state, the absence of more specific traces becomes suggestive, intimating that this apparent slowness and diffuseness is potentially linked to that absence. Strikes are intimated as too spatially dispersed and evanescent to have left a substantial public mark. The secrecy that enters the public sphere through these snippets of information therefore becomes suggestive in its equivocal nature: it alludes to the unverifiable idea that the spatial and temporal qualities of strikes contribute to this secrecy. These details materialise a public space where the existence and extent of secrecy remains unclear.

As with representations of lynching, this representation of absent strikes as diffuse and slight events distances drone violence from wider society, focusing attention on the struggle to understand and scrutinise this practice. The idea that “[f]or the first time in US history, a president regularly signs off on the killing of named individuals ... acting as judge, jury and executioner” (*McGreal*, 2013), hints at the possibility of ongoing secrecy and signifies the absence of those targeted individuals. This secrecy frames this sparse detail as suggestive, alluding to those targeted as remaining unknown, but insodoing it frames strikes as significant on account of their continuing *without public awareness* – only the President signs off on them. In the context of the above coverage, these intimations represent strikes as ongoing but ephemeral: they continue to enter the public sphere but are possibly too slight and diffuse to comprehend. Newsreaders are invited to adopt the position of a public that is distanced from and cannot scrutinise these ephemeral events.

As with lynching coverage, the struggle to comprehend becomes the meaning of covert strikes, shaping a subject-position focused on uncontrollable ephemerality and its consequences for public scrutiny. These representations of the intangible spaces of strikes and suspected secrecy allude to absent casualties only as emblems of these events' insubstantial existence. While these allusions implicitly undercut rationalisations of strikes' effectiveness, since that effectiveness cannot be confirmed in public, they narrow the ethical orientation toward casualties that readers are invited to adopt. Absent strikes are materialised as distanced and

disconnected from the public, made intelligible through the suggestive but unverifiable implications of that distance, and not through the violence inflicted upon casualties.

6. Disintegrating violence

When coverage explicitly materialises the spaces where covert strikes have been carried out, this political dynamic of distancing and marginalisation is intensified. Individual strikes are reported through sparse fragments of rumour, speculation and debris emanating from the sites where they occurred. The event is narrated through the motif of the drone's missile hitting an object. “At least three missiles were fired at a house in the Shalam Raghzai region of South Waziristan”, states a typical account of a strike in Pakistan. “[A] second attack struck a suspected militant compound in Wacha Dana, about seven miles northwest of Wana, the main town of South Waziristan. At least 14 people were killed in the first two attacks, [Pakistani] officials sa[y]”. Hours later, “a drone fired at a vehicle at Darnashtra in the Shawal area”, killing “at least four people”. These details “could not be independently verified” (*Masood*, 2011).

As events, these three strikes are represented through the detonation of missiles and the destruction of buildings and vehicle. No other information extends their spatial and temporal boundaries beyond this site and moment. With no U.S. acknowledgement of these details, themselves derived from local residents who “do not necessarily provide accurate information” (*Masood*, 2011), a mere suspicion of secrecy is produced at these sites, framing these public traces of sparse unverified information, and the absence of clear details of those killed, as suggestive. Secrecy highlights the residue's ambiguity around the identities of casualties, “said to be foreigners” in hearsay fashion (*Masood*, 2011); framed as suggestive because public, this ambiguity intimates that casualties' militant affiliations may actually remain unconfirmed by the state. At the same time, this allusion from the space of residue figures these strikes as fleeting events that leave too little in their wake to deduce further details.

The consequences of this representation for newsreaders' ethical orientations towards strike violence can be elaborated through visual coverage of strike debris. In purporting to visualise an event that was seemingly not documented for the public, photographs of debris emphasise that these are spaces not of state action but of its disintegration. A typical *Associated Press* report of a strike in Yemen on 19 April 2014 hints at the unseen violence of a strike through its after-effects (*Associated Press*, 2014, Fig. 1). Against claims from a “civilian survivor” that the strike “tossed [an SUV] some 20 m away”, producing “flying debris” and “explosions



Fig. 1. Car targeted by reported strike in Sawmaa area of al-Bayda province, Yemen, 19 April 2014 (Picture by: Nasir al-Sanna'a/AP/PA Images).

... for another 30 min” (Associated Press, 2014), the photograph of a burnt chassis signifies that the event itself has long passed. In affirming a strike occurred but showing only decayed wreckage, with the camera’s angle highlighting the vehicle’s apparent isolation, the representation signifies the dearth of enduring material markers of the strike within this space.

The report ends by noting that “[t]here was no immediate U.S. comment on the strike”, with the U.S. “typically not” acknowledging “[strikes] done by the CIA” (Associated Press, 2014). This state silence produces a suspicion that this event was a secret kept by the state from the public, framing this space of debris as significant in remaining in the public sphere. This framing highlights the absence among this debris of any markers of those targeted: made intelligible as public evidence of an otherwise-covert event, the chassis implicitly signifies its inscrutability in relation to the claimed identities of those killed, “nine suspected al-Qaida militants and three civilians” (Associated Press, 2014). This inscrutability and suspicion of secrecy together intimate the unverifiable idea that casualties’ identities could not have easily been confirmed from such wreckage, shaping a subject-position of doubt and uncertainty over who was killed within this space. But in emerging from rumours and debris that highlight the scantness of this event’s public traces, this intimation frames the strike as too ephemeral, its footprint too insubstantial, for details to be confirmed in its wake. The event becomes meaningful in its perceived intangibility, figuring absent casualties as significant only in indicating this struggle to comprehend. This marginalisation is inconspicuous, since newsreaders are prompted to scrutinise the debris, rather than consider how casualties are being represented in their absence.

Even the more rapid reporting of strikes through social media extends this representational dynamic. A strike in Marib, Yemen on 26 January 2015 was initially reported by journalists on Twitter, with one re-tweeted image, captioned “Just after Marib drone strike against #AQAP”, showing black smoke rising from the horizon into an empty sky over the sparse town (Scahill, 2015, Fig. 2). The smoke perches on the brink of immateriality and dissipation, signifying that the destructive event has been and gone unseen, without leaving much tangible or enduring material trace. With the sparsity of the report producing a suspicion of secrecy, and the space produced visually as secluded and distanced, this residue positioned far from the camera’s eye alludes to the absence of the targeted bodies among these traces. Framed by secrecy, this space intimates the possibility that casualties’ identities remain inconclusive and indeterminable, and that such secluded sites may be aiding those identities’ secretion or obscuration, affording witnesses only snatched opaque images in the event’s aftermath. But these intimations from dissipating, less-than-material traces represent the event as ephemeral, by implicitly suggesting that such a strike occurs too quickly and leaves too little behind. These intimations thus link the insubstantiality of the strike to the ambiguity over absent casualties, implicitly figuring strikes as intangible in-and-of-themselves. In a dynamic echoing lynching coverage, this marginalises the violence inflicted upon casualties by making the latter significant only in reflecting the sparseness and slightness of these covert events in public space. Witnesses are prompted to focus on the idea that instead of targeted bodies, there is only ever smoke.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the residue of covert drone strikes: the snippets, rumours and debris left in their wake. While previous scholarship on drone warfare has endeavoured to unearth and analyse the social practices and materials involved in the secretive



Fig. 2. Smoke from reported drone strike in Marib, Yemen, 26 January 2015 (Scahill, 2015).

operationalisation of strikes, this article has demonstrated how the residue of strikes produces state secrecy as a suspicion *within the public sphere*. This dynamic materialises public spaces of suspected secrecy, and reframes arbitrary traces as public evidence of hidden activities; this framing highlights as significant any absences within those traces which leave them unable to confirm the characteristics of people and objects.

Drawing on recent colonial historiography, the article has theorised that secrecy and absence produce intimations, unverifiable ideas about absent people and objects. In the case of covert strikes, lacunae in rumours and debris are made suggestive by a suspicion of secrecy, allowing them to signify unverifiable ideas: that the identities of casualties are possibly being kept hidden or cannot be confirmed, that secluded spaces are colluding in state secrecy, and that targeting mechanisms are not as infallible as is proclaimed. These possibilities undermine explicit claims and curtail any rationalisation of these programmes as exceptional but effective and humane forms of counter-terrorism. Intimations therefore undermine the hegemony of state frames of meaning. In so doing, they figure unseen strikes as possibly too spatially diffuse and temporally slight, and leaving too little material trace, for anyone to establish ‘what happened’. These intimations therefore shape a subject-position focused on the struggle to comprehend intangible covert violence.

To examine the ethical orientations produced towards covert violence by these intimations, the article posited an historical affiliation between covert drone strikes and lynching violence based on their similar representation through traces in their aftermath and their shared absences, the absence of violated bodies

from that representation. The explicit narration of lynching as an aberrant regional throwback invited the national public to adopt a position from which the violence 'confronted' them in its aberrance, by cutting against supposed broader societal progress. This subject-position saw lynching as unnerving owing to its confounding causes and implications, focusing attention on the struggle to comprehend its dynamics. Representations of covert strike residue produce a similar subject-position, not through explicit narration but through hints and allusions that reshape the explicit claims made about these drone programmes. Public spaces of strike residue intimate unseen strikes as ephemeral, evanescent and insubstantial events, prompting witnesses to understand these programmes as significant in terms of being too intangible for them to comprehend. As with lynching, this marginalises ethical consideration of the violence inflicted upon casualties from the meaning and significance of the practice.

The political dynamics of intimation suggest that when confronted with these spaces of suspected secrecy and absence, the question of ethical witnessing cannot be answered adequately by continuing to treat absence as a problem to be overcome. Attempts to reconstruct strikes and tell the stories of those 'living under' them are an important corrective to news coverage (Cavallaro, Sonnenberg, & Knuckey, 2012). But an impulse towards recovery from residue, towards interpreting ethics as unearthing lived experience and suffering from these rumours and debris, risks being frustrated and perpetuating a dynamic that fixates on "the impossibility of retrieval" (Best, 2011, p. 156). A more ethical response to the residue of covert strikes needs to acknowledge the political dynamics of absence *as absence*, as it already exists in the public sphere. Secrecy and absence are not epistemological barriers; they materialise covert strikes and the spaces they leave behind, and shape subject-positions that recognise the absence of casualties within those spaces, and doubts and suspicions alluded to by that absence.

But this same subject-position nonetheless marginalises the ethical import of the violence inflicted upon absent casualties. From this position, drone strikes appear too fleeting, their public traces too insubstantial, to be understood or scrutinised, focusing attention on the conundrum this seems to pose. As with lynching, this construction of spatial and moral distance from violence obscures how casualties are implicitly positioned as irrelevant to the significance of this practice, except in reflecting this intangibility. The problem here is not that casualties are being dehumanised or effaced, as within the targeting procedures of drone warfare, but rather that witnesses' ethical orientation towards absence is narrowed to discomfort with intangibility, not the infliction of violence in-and-of-itself. Because this dynamic occurs in part through things left unspoken, and can therefore go unnoticed, an historical affiliation with lynching is one way of trying to document – and challenge – the significance afforded covert violence and its absences.

Conflict of interest

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